**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #34**

**Chassidic Service of God (continued):**

**The Use of the Imagination in Chassidut**

R. Kalonymus, grandfather of R. Kalonymus of Piaseczno, who was an influential Chassidic leader in Cracow, suggests to one of his Chassidim to use a mental image of the *tzaddik* whom he follows to remind himself of God Who performs His miracles and wonders by means of His emissaries and *tzaddikim*:

For when a person is in need of a certain thing — whether it be offspring, or a livelihood, or whatever else — then he travels to the *tzaddik* of the generation, so that he can intervene with prayer on his behalf for whatever he needs, and the *tzaddik* does as he wishes and brings the matter that he requested from the realm of potential into the realm of reality…

I have also heard *tzaddikim* advising that a person should conjure a mental picture of the *tzaddik* who intervened for what he wanted, and by means of this he will always remember the Creator's wonders, as discussed above, by recalling to mind the favor that He granted him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Another piece of advice offered by the elder R. Kalonymus, author of *Maor Va-shemesh*, is to visualize righteous individuals while engaging in marital relations, in order to influence the character of the offspring that will be born in a positive way:

For it is well known that a very great propitious custom for worthy offspring is that at the time of marital relations one should conjure in his mind the image of *tzaddikim*. This is the meaning of the *mishna*, “Set your eyes upon the family” (*Ta’anit* 4:8) — meaning, that a person should create in his mind, at the time of marital relations, a picture of the righteous people of his family, and be at one with them [in his thoughts], so that [he and his wife] will have worthy offspring, like themselves…[[2]](#footnote-2)

The use of imagination is a key tool in the involvement in *yichudim* (unifications) and *kavanot*, as R. Elimelekh explains, as part of his teaching on the *kavana* of eating:

While eating one should also conjure in his mind's eye the letters *mem, alef, khaf, lamed* (*ma’akhal*, food) in Ashuri (Assyrian) script, and concentrate on the total of 91, which is the same as the total of the letters comprising the Tetragrammaton with the integration of the Name *Ado-nai*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The letters of the word *ma’akhal* (food) in gematria add up to a total of 91. Similarly, the combination of the Tetragrammaton (Y-H-V-H) and *Ado-nai* also adds up to 91. In other words, while a person is eating he can focus on unifying the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Divine Presence — a common and central unification in Kabbala.

The use of the imagination involves the person who is eating seeing not only the food, but also a mental picture of the letters for the word *ma’akhal*, concentrating on them to achieve the unification. Thus the person elevates the sparks of holiness that are in the food and fulfills the precept, “In all your ways, know Him.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

R. Mendel of Lesko advised his Chassidim, who were afraid of violating the prohibition of "You shall not covet,” to image the prohibition as though it were written before them in Ashuri (Assyrian) script:

For example, when a person is about to covet a certain object, he should conjure in his mind's eye the prohibition of “You shall not covet” as though it were written before him.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Someone once came to R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha and asked that he pray on his behalf that he should not experience nocturnal emissions. R. Simcha Bunim suggested that he enlist his imagination:

A man came to him asking that he pray that he be spared nocturnal emissions. And he told him that before going to sleep he should create a mental picture of him [i.e., of R. Simcha Bunim] – and he would be spared.[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Elimelekh proposes that one reinforce his adherence to the practice set forth in the *Tzetil Katan* by imagining that someone is standing next to him, telling him to follow its guidance:

He should imagine constantly — and especially when reading this *Tzetil Katan —* that someone is standing close by and urging him very loudly to perform all of these practices, and not to neglect even the tiniest detail. When he accustoms himself to doing this, then with time he will feel a powerful urge on the part of his own soul, tongues of Godly fire…[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Gemara (*Sota* 36b) teaches that when tempted by Potifar's wife, Yosef was saved from sinning thanks to the image of his father Ya’akov which appeared before him. R. Tzvi Elimelekh of Dinov proposes that a person evoke the image of his rabbi in order to save himself from sinful thoughts – even if his rabbi is no longer alive:

And likewise, when he sees that he is danger of descending to the very depths and he is pursued by sinful thoughts, he should conjure up a picture of his rabbi, such that his thinking is directed towards his rabbi's thinking, which encompasses him with his mind, and then his rabbi's thinking has its effect on him — even if his rabbi has already [passed on from the world and] ascended to heaven."[[8]](#footnote-8)

All of the above indicates that various *tzaddikim* made use of the power of the imagination in different ways. What, then, was R. Kalonymus's unique contribution in this regard? He was not innovative with regard to the means, but he did establish the systematic use of the imagination and its centrality in Divine service, as we shall see.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. R. Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, *Maor Va-shemesh* (Jerusalem: 5748), *Parashat Miketz*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. *Likkutim*. The source of this idea is to be found in Ramban’s *Iggeret Ha-kodesh* (chapter 5), which emphasizes the central role of the imagination during marital relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, ‘Tzetil Katan.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For *yichudim* relating to eating, see R. Wacks, *Be-sod Ha-yichud: Ha-yichudim Be-haguto Ha-kabbalit Chasidit shel Rav Chayim ben Shelomo Tyrer Mi-*Czernowitz (Los Angeles: 2006), pp. 106, 114-118, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. C.S. Rotenberg (ed.), *Hanhagot Tzaddikim* (Jerusalem: 5748), Part IV, p. 98, R. Mendel of Lesko. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Y.M. Baum (ed.), *Sefer Kol Mevaser* (Bnei Brak: 5751), Part I, *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *Tzetil Katan*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Tzvi Elimelekh of Dinov, *Be-agra De-pirka* (Bnei Brak: 5759), #13. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)